

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leading On Opportunity

Overview

The Opportunity Task Force, a group of 20 community members, spent 18 months in 2015 and 2016 focused on the inheritance of intergenerational poverty and its negative impact on the life trajectory of far too many of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's children and youth. Yes, we are a thriving, opportunity-rich community that continues to attract people—nearly 50 a day—but that is only part of our story. In 2013, a Harvard University/UC Berkeley study uncovered the other part of our story – our community ranked 50th out of 50 in economic mobility among the largest U.S. cities—specifically the ability of a child born in the bottom income quintile to rise to the top income quintile as an adult.

The results of this study were tangible with serious consequences. It was time for our community to take bold action to bridge this opportunity gap. Community, government, and philanthropic leaders recognized the need for action, and formed the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force, knowing we could no longer remain idle when many of our residents struggle to make it day-to-day, and face tremendous challenges and barriers to opportunity.

Although ranked last in the study, Charlotte-Mecklenburg is not unique in dealing with low mobility for those living at or near the poverty level. Other communities across the country are dealing with the issue as well, particularly in the South.

The Task Force's highest aspiration is that Charlotte-Mecklenburg leaders—governmental, philanthropic, business, faith, nonprofit, neighborhood and grassroots—as well as the community at large, will come together in the months and years ahead to reorganize our systems and structures, change policies and practices and otherwise boldly embrace and rally around a vision of **Charlotte-Mecklenburg as a community that cares about all our children and youth—regardless of income, race or zip code—and where all our children feel they belong, have big dreams, and find the opportunities to achieve those dreams.**

This executive summary provides an overview of the key findings and recommendations detailed in our full report to the community. We acknowledge we don't have all the answers, and others may disagree with our findings. Therefore, we view our report as a living document, one we hope will be refined and added to over time. The Task Force is confident the report will not sit on a shelf. Already, numerous organizations have committed to align their work and interests around different aspects of economic opportunity. Others have indicated they are awaiting our report to identify how to best play a role.

Next critical steps include creation of an implementation structure with a diverse Leading on Opportunity Council/Board to provide overall leadership, working groups to engage diverse community voices and expertise, and dedicated staff to provide day-to-day support for the work going forward. A dashboard of key success metrics will also be developed, enabling us to measure short, medium and long-term progress.

Focus of Task Force Strategies and Recommendations

During our discovery process, the Task Force consulted with over 50 national, regional and local experts who helped us understand the multiple, complex issues that impact generational poverty and access to opportunity. They shared evidence-based research, data, and well-informed perspectives. We also considered the input of thousands of community members with whom we engaged in our listening sessions and countless other interactions. **After much deliberation and fierce debate, we narrowed our focus to three highly interrelated determinants we believe are most likely to have the greatest influence on the opportunity trajectory of an individual:**

Opportunity

- **Early Care and Education**
- **College and Career Readiness**

- **Child and Family Stability**

We also identified two factors that cut across all three determinants: **1) Impact of Segregation** and **2) Social Capital**, the relationships and networks people have that can connect them to opportunities. These are omnipresent factors with profound impact on economic opportunity, social mobility, and general quality of life.

The Task Force believes the community's greatest leverage for tackling intergenerational poverty and breaking down barriers to economic opportunity will come from focusing on systemic and structural change versus relying upon programmatic intervention. Although programs are critically important, they often deal with symptoms of problematic, complex systems and structures over which they have little control. By addressing systems and structures, we attend to underlying policies, practices and mindsets contributing to negative outcomes for children and families. Therefore, the strategies and recommendations in our report focus mainly on systems and structures, while some of the associated tactics we suggest for implementation are programmatic or activity-based. In total, our report includes 21 key strategies, 91 recommendations, and over 100 implementation tactics and policy considerations.

Key Determinants & Cross-Cutting Factors

Cross-Cutting Factor #1: Impacts Of Segregation

Segregation stands apart as a cross-cutting factor because it is foundational to everything else. Not only are we segregated by race and ethnicity, we are also segregated by wealth and poverty. Maps of our county consistently reflect a “crescent” of lower-opportunity neighborhoods dominated by people of color in contrast with a “wedge” of white, wealthier residents in south and north Mecklenburg.

Chart: Segregation by Wealth, Poverty, and Race & Ethnicity

Charlotte-Mecklenburg has a deep history of segregation and discrimination that has manifested in community and neighborhood development over the years, and patterns of isolation that have evolved. Recent research indicates that this racial and economic segregation has deepened the gap in opportunity, despite many advancements in becoming a more inclusive community. Segregation is particularly difficult as it is a barrier that we, as a part of larger American society, have little practice in confronting openly and intentionally.

The longer we permit our current systems, policies and institutions to remain unchanged and implicit bias to play a role, the more lasting these trends will become—only exacerbating the divide in our community. The recent police shooting and subsequent protests focused our collective attention on the stark divide that exists. We may have inherited the obstacles to opportunity put in place over generations, but we have the power and responsibility to ensure this same inheritance is not passed on to our children and youth.

Task Force Strategies to Address Impacts of Segregation

- **Strategy A**

Acknowledge the significant roles segregation and racialization have played in our current opportunity narrative and commit to becoming a more inclusive, fair, and just community.

- **Strategy B**

Address the complex, multi-faceted issue of school segregation with a systems approach.

Determinant #1: Early Care & Education

A child's earliest years have a profound and often lasting impact on his or her school success, career success, and adult life. Early care and education in particular pose opportunities for substantial long-term benefits to both children and the general public. High-ranking Federal Reserve official Arthur J. Rolnick and economist Rob Grunewald estimate a 12 percent return on investment, after inflation, for the intrinsic value of early care and education programs. Participating in quality early care and education programs also enables parents to seek, secure, and retain employment, increasing household income and positively affecting family stability.

Quality early care and education have resounding effects. They lay the groundwork for individuals to complete high school and postsecondary education, while decreasing the likelihood of the need for public assistance and chances of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Research shows that children enrolled in high quality preschool programs are less likely to repeat grades, less likely to run into trouble with the law, and typically earn around \$2,000 more per month as adults than those not enrolled. Additionally, early care and education support Charlotte-Mecklenburg's current commitment to improve literacy through programs such as Read Charlotte. The Task Force was so certain of the positive impacts of early care and education, we committed early on to support the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council's (CELC) funding for a major study for this subject in 2016. The study will provide a comprehensive roadmap for creating wider access to quality early care and education in our community.

Task Force Strategies to Address Early Care and Education

- **Strategy C**

Make the necessary investments to ensure all children in Mecklenburg County from birth to age five have access to quality early childhood care and education.

- **Strategy D**

Strengthen the early care and education workforce to improve the quality and experiences of early care and education available to children ages birth to five.

- **Strategy E**

Support parents and other caregivers as a child's first teacher in promoting positive early brain development, social and emotional health and early literacy beginning at birth.

Determinant #2: Career & College Readiness

It is difficult to pinpoint the precise combination of factors ensuring a young person will advance to a successful career; however, a four-year degree or other postsecondary credential or certification have become essential in equipping students with the skills and education needed to build successful career paths and to support thriving families. Many middle-skill jobs for which only an industry certification is required are well-paying and in high demand. While the Task Force acknowledges the importance of a college education, a four-year degree should not be the only option we promote to our students. **We must change the current mindset around technical education and community colleges for students at all income levels.**

Jobs by Skill Level, North Carolina, 2015

Demand for Middle-Skill Jobs is Strong

Source: NSC analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics by State, May 2015.

Our community must also place a higher priority on exposing all children to viable career options and different pathways through career exploration, guidance, and opportunities. A clear sequence of academic and technical courses, work-based learning experiences, intentional career and college advising, and opportunities to develop skills and earn credentials that will meet the current and future needs of the region's employers should be provided. Apprenticeships, paid internships, and other work-based learning opportunities help students apply academic learning to real-life work experience. Participating in work-based learning can be a game changer for many students. Special care should be taken to support students through all these processes, particularly students who may not have someone in their lives guiding them along the path. We also must not lose sight of our disconnected youth and young adults—those ages 16 to 24 who are not in school or the workforce. They are at exceptionally high risk of economic and social hardship.

Task Force Strategies to Address College and Career Readiness

- **Strategy F**

Broaden the range of and access to high quality college and career pathways offered by our K-12 and postsecondary institutions, ensuring all students have access to and support for the full range of opportunities.

- **Strategy G**

Equip all students and their parents with the information and guidance they need to understand and navigate multiple college and career pathways, preparation, and processes.

- **Strategy H**

Galvanize community support to develop and implement a multi-faceted plan to increase paid work-based learning opportunities for students.

- **Strategy I**

Expand and strengthen support for first-generation and other low-socioeconomic students who need help transitioning to and completing postsecondary education.

- **Strategy J**

Create more on-ramps to education, training, and employment for our disconnected youth and young adults (ages 16-24).

- **Strategy K**

Elevate and actively promote the critical importance of acquiring a postsecondary degree and/or industry certification for our young people to successfully compete in our rapidly changing, technologically advanced labor market.

Determinant #3: Child & Family Stability

Multiple and complex factors can impact family instability and compound stressful living environments for children and youth. The Task Force identified eight interrelated factors we believe have the greatest impact on child and family stability that need to be understood and addressed holistically as part of our community's opportunity agenda.

- **Family Structure**

Research suggests that a child raised by two parents outperforms peers raised in a single-parent environment in many key developmental areas. Current trends, however, suggest a continuing departure from the traditional nuclear family structure. The prevalence of single-parent households can be driven, and at times exacerbated, by numerous circumstances and social phenomena including mass incarceration, reduction in benefits, and changes in cultural norms.

- **Family Formation**

Access to reproductive health information and care play an important role in the stability of a family. Unintended pregnancy has the capacity to take a young woman or man off track from his or her educational and employment plans, prompting researchers to agree that the path to reducing intergenerational poverty includes encouraging all young people, regardless of background, to delay parenthood until ready. In addition, existing gaps in access to maternal and postpartum care can have significant implications for both pregnant women and their infants. We must ensure that young women and men have the necessary information about and sources for reproductive health care to ensure they can plan pregnancy for when they are ready to raise a child.

- **Financial Security**

Not having sufficient income to afford housing, food, transportation, childcare, and other basic necessities can be incredibly destabilizing, stressful, and demoralizing for both parents and their children. The Task Force proposes advancing toward the aspirational goal of all families earning a living wage by creating and providing greater access to more living-wage jobs, and by helping more low-income parents develop their skills and connect with such opportunities.

- **Access to Affordable Housing**

Housing prices continue to rise while wages remain low, causing families to move often and, at times, to unsafe environments. We currently have a deficit of approximately 34,000 affordable housing units for people earning 60 percent or more below of the Area Median Income (AMI.) We must prioritize affordable housing in the same way we do other key infrastructure areas, promoting home ownership and investments in communities. This dire situation requires new and innovative thinking, community awareness, and dramatically expanded funding. The City of Charlotte recently announced a goal of building or preserving 5,000 affordable units over the next three years. The Task Force applauds these actions, but the reality is we will never make a significant impact in the deficit unless we set bolder goals. We realize no single strategy will solve our affordable housing crisis. Rather, multiple strategies and tactics must be undertaken, and greater collaboration among the public, private and nonprofit sectors will be required.

- **Public Transportation**

Families relying on public transportation to get to work, to take children to child care, to access public services, to find health care, to go grocery shopping and to participate in out-of-school activities face challenges, particularly when a trip involves multiple destinations. Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) has a study underway to improve access and efficiencies within the system, which the Task Force supports.

- **Mental Health**

It is difficult to disentangle poverty and poor mental health. Poor mental health is a significant cause of wider social and health problems. The impacts of mental health are not limited to people who live in poverty. It is an issue experienced by people across the entire economic strata. However, recent research reinforces that living with the chronic stress and anxiety of financial instability can create a particular psychological burden on low-income parents and their children. The concept of "scarcity" can leave low-income children and their families with diminished capacity to perform everyday tasks, such as finding a job or completing schoolwork.

- **Involvement in the Criminal Justice System**

A comprehensive discussion of racial and ethnic disparities cannot omit the legacy of systematic oppression that underlies our current levels of mass incarceration as well as the overrepresentation of African Americans—particularly young males—in our jails and prisons. In recent years, disparities in the criminal justice system have been revealed, from policing and law enforcement, to pretrial release decisions, enforcement of drug laws, ability to pay court fees and fines, sentencing, and even traffic stops. The Task Force did not deeply examine national reform in criminal justice, although we recognize it is much needed to address inequities and disproportionality in arrests and incarcerations. However, as related to economic opportunity, we thought it important to address the impact of the criminal justice system on children, youth, and families in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

- **Accessing Community Services and Support**

Charlotte-Mecklenburg's public and community assistance programs span a range of support systems including housing, disability, physical health, mental health, child welfare, and workforce services. These systems and the programs within them can have tremendous, positive impacts. The Task Force applauds the tireless efforts of those working within the human service sector. However, our human service systems and programs are often not coordinated, lack common goals for impact, and can be difficult to navigate for those in need of assistance.

Task Force Strategies to Address Child and Family Stability

- **Strategy L**

Encourage the formation and maintenance of committed two-parent families.

- **Strategy M**

Ensure young women and men have the necessary information about and sources for reproductive health care so they can plan for pregnancy when they are ready to raise a child.

- **Strategy N**

Improve birth outcomes of all children and their mothers.

- **Strategy O**

Help more families get on and stay on a path to living-wage income and asset building.

- **Strategy P**

Take dramatic steps to address our affordable housing crisis, which will stabilize working families, prevent family homelessness, and minimize the disruption of a large number of children who move from school to school due to housing affordability issues.

- **Strategy Q**

Create a more connected community to ensure all families have ready access to employment, shopping, service areas, schools, parks, and other daily destinations.

- **Strategy R**

Develop efforts focused on addressing mental health issues and/or reducing the mental health impacts of living in low-opportunity environments.

- **Strategy S**

Invest in strategies that support comprehensive criminal justice reform, and create a community where families are not destabilized due to interactions with the criminal justice system.

- **Strategy T**

Re-envision a human services system in which the needs of families are addressed holistically and services and support are coordinated to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Cross-Cutting Factor #2: Social Capital

In addition to systemic and policy changes, we need to address the reality that children and youth who grow up in low-opportunity neighborhoods or attend high-poverty schools often find they are playing on an uneven field compared to those who grow up in higher-opportunity areas. Many do not have relationships, role models, and experiences that help them see possibilities for their lives outside their current circumstances. The Task Force believes social capital may, indeed, be the “secret sauce” for creating greater access to opportunity for our children and youth. Cultivating relationships and networks as social capital enables people to connect to information, ideas, resources, support, and opportunities. It also can help people navigate through unexpected crises and offer tangible pathways to achieving dreams. As Brookings scholar Richard Reeves has conveyed, social capital can help shift a young person's vague hopes to active aspirations.

As we explored social capital, the Task Force expanded the traditional definition to an even larger concept: creating a culture of caring in Mecklenburg County. However, a community's culture cannot be prescribed or commanded by a single group or entity; it must be an authentic representation of who we are. The culture of caring must be demonstrated through our actions, decisions and investments. We believe by more of us sharing our relationships, networks and connections, we tangibly demonstrate we care. In addition, **if every house of faith, elected official, civic group, employer, foundation, institution or organization asked this one simple question before making significant decisions—“How will this decision impact the opportunity trajectory of our children, youth and families?”—the actions taken as a result would tangibly demonstrate the level of our community's commitment and caring for all children, youth, and families.**

Task Force Strategy to Address Social Capital

- **Strategy U**

Ensure all children, youth and families have relationships in the community that connect them to opportunities, information, and resources; broaden their horizons about what's possible in their lives; assist in navigating through unexpected crises to stay on track; offer tangible pathways toward achieving their aspirations; and demonstrate to every child, youth, and family that their contribution is vital to the success of our community.

Next Steps & Call to Action

The Task Force believes our report can serve as a catalyst for engaging the community in a deeper conversation and continued investigation of the best paths forward to bridge the opportunity gap that exists in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Establishing the Leading on Opportunity implementation structure described earlier will be one of the first critical steps to take. In our full report, we identify principles to help guide the work moving forward. Diverse voices from across the community must be meaningfully engaged throughout the process, and on the Leading on Opportunity Board/Council.

In the meantime, we call on every resident, business, house of faith, foundation, nonprofit organization, government entity, neighborhood organization, civic groups and others to join our Leading on Opportunity campaign, review our report, and provide feedback. It is our hope that with collective focus and accountability, Charlotte-Mecklenburg will transform through the experience of doing this work together, and we will earn a new reputation as a community that is "Leading on Opportunity".

Our Children. Their Future. Our Commitment.

Chapter 1
Context

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